

BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE CONFERENCE CALL
SUBJECT: IRAQ OPERATIONAL UPDATE BRIEFING
AND PREVIEW OF GENERAL PETRAEUS'S FIRST PRESS CONFERENCE

BRIEFER: MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM CALDWELL, USA,
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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT.

GEN. CALDWELL: Well, I don't really have -- I'll just briefly tell you real
quickly is I continue to have daily interaction with General Petraeus as we move forward.
He's going to do his first press conference tomorrow sometime around 11:00 our time.
So in about 18 hours, he's going to do his press conference. And I think what you'll find
when he comes out, he's going to talk about the fact that, you know, our effort here to
improve security in Iraq is going to take some time and determination; that the way ahead

is going to be challenging, but the mission of improving security is a doable one, is, I think, the theme you'll hear him talk about.

He'll talk about expectations. He'll state the fact that Operation Fard al-Qanun is not going to be seen in days or weeks, but over the course of months. He continually says that. He'll talk about patience. He'll say, you know, while we've got plans in place to improve the security, our early actions to carry out these plans are showing some very positive signs forward. It's still going to take many months, though, till we get all the additional troops in here. And I can talk about numbers and months of when they're all going to arrive, if you want to discuss that as we're talking; I've got that kind of data.

He'll also stress the fact again that Iraqi's national government, unity government, you know, is still really less than 10 months old. And although it looks like, you know, it should be four years old, you know, it's the fourth government they've basically had here in three and a half years. So it's still building its capabilities and processes.

He'll talk about expectations. He'll stress that we should not expect to eliminate all the violence. Even when all the additional forces arrive in country and the economic program starts and the political piece continues to get further implemented, we're still not going to eliminate all the violence. But our job is to reduce that level enough to give the Iraqi people and their government an opportunity to find political solutions to their problems.

And I think the last thing he'll stress, too, is commitment, and that commitment here is required; that if we want to achieve success, it's going to require sustained commitment not only by the multinational force, but by the government of Iraq, too, and that we're going to remain committed, and that for the Iraqis to achieve success, they're going to have to place their loyalties to the state above their ethno-sectarian loyalties and start supporting the government of Iraq and their security forces as they, you know, take on these militias and other illegal armed groups out there.

I think those are the -- I mean, I've heard that constant drumbeat from him now for three weeks as he and I talk almost daily, trying to make sure we're -- I understand and I'm -- can articulate where he's sort of coming from. So I think those are some of the big things you'll see him say.

And then he's going to share experiences. He has been through the entire country. He has been everywhere at this point, multiple times, really, in some cases. He was walking downtown Baghdad as late as two days ago. He's out on foot a lot in the town of -- city of Baghdad, walking around, shaking hands with people, interfacing, asking them questions. So he's got a very good base of current visuals to draw from. He understands the importance things like these upcoming conferences, the budget conference today, the Good Neighbors Conference on Friday -- Saturday -- Friday they get here; Saturday, the Good Neighbors Conference -- and the potential that these things will have towards solving some of the challenges this country faces.

Anyway, with that, I'll be glad to take whatever questions anybody has and talk about anything anybody would like to talk about.

Q Great. Okay. General, this is Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. I've just come back from Jansteb (sp) in Anbar province, mostly with the Marines, and I was struck with their concept of the outpost. How is -- mostly in Ramadi, for example -- you've got the buildings, and you've been out there --

GEN. CALDWELL: Right.

Q -- where they take a building, they -- then they put a security zone, call -- 50 to a hundred meters out and around, and you're walking patrols morning, noon and night. How -- but I don't see this working in Baghdad. I don't see -- I mean, is manpower-intensive -- I don't see the logistics working out, because you've got the convoys who are being going in and going out. And then I'm looking at the statement from the Pentagon yesterday, from Deputy Secretary of Defense England, saying we're needing those 7,000 troops. Could you talk to us more, please, about how this -- how your surge plan and the outpost plan in Baghdad and the surrounding areas is going to work out?

GEN. CALDWELL: Okay. We -- you know, within Baghdad we're calling them joint security stations, JSSs.

Q Okay.

GEN. CALDWELL: And we've already established -- I think we're up to 23 now that are out there and in place. We're building the one right now in Sadr City, and that will be complete here in just a couple days. And we'll occupy that one full-time, too.

But we'll eventually go to -- it -- in our initial planning, we have got maybe 35 or 40 of these joint security stations. We're finding that the interaction with the people and the successes we're starting to have in terms of receiving more information, tips, whatever you want to call it, from the people, and the levels of violence going down where these things exist, that we -- we're now looking at about 70 of them.

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So in Baghdad and the surrounding area of Baghdad City itself, we're going to put in around 70 of these joint security stations/combat outposts for where our troops operate from with the Iraqi security forces, both police and army, out with the population where we can provide really better protection by doing that.

So I mean we're seeing tremendous, already, assurances of the ability of what this thing can do by the 20 or so that we already have up and operating within the city, that we're going to continue to expand on that and put more out there.

Q How secure are these? I mean, I've been through -- well, I haven't been through Baghdad as much as you guys, but this is different than Ramadi, where you can clear an area, you can take an old building that's -- and you've got 50 meters, 100 meters where you can sandbag it in and then run a perimeter. Are you able to do that in Baghdad?

GEN. CALDWELL: There is that question. I mean, everybody seems to think by going out there and putting ourselves in these combat outposts, the joint security stations, that we're increasing our exposure and our risk. I'll tell you we are increasing our exposure, but overall our risk level will go down.

Q Okay.

GEN. CALDWELL: If you can imagine every night going into these huge operating bases, and we've got to come out in about five or six ways and drive back down streets trying to get back to a location to conduct operations, not establishing and maintaining long-term relationships, not understanding the needs of the people and being able to start building goodwill, I mean there truly are -- we hesitate to talk a lot about it, but we're actually seeing not large numbers but very, very small numbers of people come back to their homes, you know, in the 20s and 30s in different places right now, which is -- I mean that's the kind of thing you'd want to see a lot of. I mean, this is literally just a drop in the bucket, but the fact that they're not continuing to get displaced and they're not moving out in as great numbers over the last two weeks is an encouraging sign. It doesn't mean it's going to stay that way, but it's an encouraging sign.

Q Are the Shi'as still squeezing out the Sunnis, like they are in Mahmudiyah and south Babil, or has that slowed down a bit also?

GEN. CALDWELL: That has slowed down in the last two, three weeks. When you look at a map of last summer and you look at a map now, as best we could establish where the mixed neighborhoods were and where they were predominantly Shi'a and Sunni, you know, you see a real difference in the disposition of these maps.

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And so we've been watching it closely. But we're very encouraged over these last two or three weeks and seeing people not moving out, not changing homes, and in fact, a few people actually coming back. And again, I stress just a very, very few. I don't want to give this perception like there's large numbers. That's not the case. But even five or 10 families is a change in the right direction.

Q Right. And please don't misunderstand my question. I think the outpost concept is tremendous. I, you know, would almost wish we'd started doing this a year ago, back when the Marines were doing this in Anbar, would have made maybe in Baghdad a big difference over here today.

GEN. CALDWELL: Well, you know what, you're exactly right. When you -- you know, General Petraeus will be the first to tell you, when you study counterinsurgency, to be successful you have to protect the people. And although we perhaps may have thought we were protecting them the right way before, we are finding, at least here in the initial couple of weeks, that there is much greater protection being provided to them by a greater presence, enduring presence, out in the city than there was going back and forth to large operating bases.

Q Okay, thank you.

Guys, you better jump in, otherwise I'm going to monopolize the general.

Q General, this is Bill Roggio with billroggio.com.

GEN. CALDWELL: Hi, Bill.

Q Hello. How are you today?

We're definitely seeing some -- a reduction of violence in Baghdad over the last several weeks. Now it seems what we're seeing here is this fight is being taken out into the provinces. We had the major bombing in Karbala yesterday. And I just saw there were several attacks today, a big jail break in Mosul. A lot of the units seem to -- the Iraqi and U.S. units have been stripped down to secure Baghdad. Is the coalition aware of this? And what steps are being taken? Is this being taken into account, the additional brigades, U.S. brigades that are coming in?

GEN. CALDWELL: Bill, it is. And I tell you, we saw it in the two previous attempts in the Baghdad security plans. When we first started, we actually saw some of the violence leave Baghdad and pick up in areas outside of the Baghdad area. And we're seeing the same phenomenon again.

General Odierno has been very clear, and General Petraeus has reaffirmed it, that as these additional brigades come -- you know, we have two complete brigades here now in the city of the five.

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The lead elements of the third brigade of the five are starting to arrive in Kuwait -- you know, the lead elements of it. And so they have continually discussed the fact that it's going to be situation dependent where the third, fourth and fifth brigade goes, and if it's

determined by them that the levels of violence are coming down in Baghdad and there's been an increase out in the Diyala province or some other area, then, in fact, General Odierno will come back to General Petraeus and make a recommendation. And he's indicated he would be supportive of that, of putting them wherever is required to continue reducing the levels of violence in the country.

Q A quick follow-up to that. They say that they're training -- I think the number I saw was 7,500 additional Iraqi troops a month. Are they going to be -- the same consideration then for them when they're going to fill out the battalions, and then you're going to be flexible on how you distribute the Iraqi battalions as well back into Baghdad and into the provinces?

GEN. CALDWELL: Yeah, that's a great question because there's a continued ongoing discussion with the Iraqi security forces, with the IGFC, the Iraqi Ground Forces Command, element about where all these troops when they're trained where they go and how they get distributed. And yes, it's a continual dialogue because at some point they want to rotate their battalions, too, there coming into Baghdad. Their intent is not to leave a particular battalion in there forever, but rather at some point to rotate it back to wherever it came from and bring a different battalion in.

So we will see rotations occur. We will see these troops we've put into battalions probably that are getting ready to rotate into Baghdad. You know, we have seven of nine of the battalions that the Iraqis are supposed to bring into Baghdad in Baghdad now. The last two were down at Rustamiyah going through training. One battalion is at about, oh, probably 75 percent strength. The other one is just at 100-plus percent; 103 percent, I think, was the actual statistic.

But -- so the numbers are still varying a little per battalion, but what we have seen is the ability of them to move battalions this time, which has been phenomenal. You know, those two previous attempts to move battalions was extremely challenging and an absolute failure in some cases. But this time they will have actually here in about another week have moved all nine battalions into Baghdad, just like they had committed and said they would at the very beginning of the plan.

Q Thank you, General.

STAFF: And Richard Fernandez.

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Q Yeah, Richard Fernandez from The Belmont Club. General Caldwell, how do you intend to convey this need for patience to the public? And second, what is the likely enemy response to this? How -- you know that you need to convince the public to be more patient, because this is working, but how do you think the enemy's going to go and try and counter this?

GEN. CALDWELL: Richard, I'll tell you, on patience, it's going to take us continually discussing this and pointing that out to everybody how critical that is. Because it truly, like we said -- it's going to take months for us to get all the forces in here. I think our president probably said it best yesterday -- if, you know -- if I was trying to quote and capture something -- you know, he said we're just in the early stages of this new plan Fard al-Qanun. You know, I mean, it's the early stages, and I believe the words he used were "gradual" or "making gradual but important progress," and he's exactly right. I mean, that's a great way to say it, and we actually believe that, too. But we truly are in the early stages; only two out of five brigades here that are supposed to come in. And then the enabling forces, whether that's 4,000 to 7,000 additional enabling forces that accompany them -- it's going to take some time to get it all here. So we're just going to keep talking it. We're going to keep stressing it, keeping bringing it up and telling everybody about it.

Q Yeah, one quick follow-up. I mean, what is the -- is the enemy going to reinforce? Like I mean, I've been hearing some discussion about the movement between bringing -- the trade-off between bringing troops into Baghdad and dealing with problems in the outlying areas. I mean, they are certainly going to try and create the impression that this is going nowhere. So what do you expect the principal (right post ?) of the enemy to be?

GEN. CALDWELL: What we expect to see is an increased number of vehicle IEDs and suicide vest and IEDs. We saw it yesterday, when the two suicide vest bombers went into that crowd of people and blew themselves up, you know, as part of Arba'in; the pilgrims for Arba'in, where they -- you know, whatever -- the final count's going to be about 93 killed and another 164 wounded.

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So they're going to do whatever they can to instigate, to serve as a catalyst to start the cycle of violence.

What's amazing to us is the incredible restraint that the Iraqi citizens in Baghdad have demonstrated. Instead of taking retribution, they are exhibiting I mean truly incredible restraint. With the number of car bombs -- you know, February was one of our highest all-time highs for car bombs, for VBIEDs in Iraq. And yet, we did not see it serve as the catalyst to start this cycle of violence being accelerated even more than what it was before, and instead, what we saw was the levels of violence subsiding a little.

And we do have a full-court press going on looking for the VBIED-makers. There's a lot of assets being applied, both intelligence and ground forces, to go after just the VBIED networks because we realize that is what al Qaeda will use to try to start up the cycle of violence again. And if we can get at the sources, versus trying to just protect

in the city -- I mean, we've gone into the city, like Rusafa district; already there's been over -- oh, gosh, we're well over 100 to 200 barrier systems that have been in place just around one market to reroute traffic, to redirect it, to make certain areas off limits so that we can provide greater protection for the people as they're walking around and doing their shopping so that their life can have greater normalcy. Again, and they're doing that in more of the districts throughout Baghdad too, not just in Rusafa, but in other areas, as we speak, so we can counter it at the source where the casualties would -- they would attempt to inflict casualties. But then we want to go back to where they actually begin to make them, and we're having some positive movement forward there. I mean, we've actually been finding, in the last two or three weeks, last two weeks, a couple of VBIED facilities where they were making them, with VBIED cars there half completed, you know, where you can see the cutouts being made, and everything else. So we're making a real concerted effort to counter it at the source and at the -- where they would actually execute it, because that's how they will attempt to come back at us.

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Q Thank you.

Q General, this is Charlie Quidnunc from the Wizbang Blog Podcast.

GEN. CALDWELL: Hey, Charlie.

Q Congressman Jack Murtha was on Meet the Press on Sunday, and he said that 64 percent of the public in Iraq wants us out of Iraq. Is there any accuracy to that statement? Are we actually polling Iraqis as to what they want us to do?

GEN. CALDWELL: We call it "doing atmospherics." We do it on a regular basis. We do in fact collect a lot of data to tell us how we're trending month to month in terms of the people's -- what you'll find -- let me give you the best example, Charlie.

I was out in Fallujah here -- oh, I don't know now, about a month ago, and I was talking with the chief of police out there, and I had a good session with him. And I was telling him how amazed I was to watch the Fallujah police, who are almost all Sunni or really all Sunni, working with this Iraqi army unit, who is mostly Shi'a, at checkpoints that they're doing together out there. And it was going so well.

And you know, I said, you know, this is just an incredible, great thing to watch where it's, you know, Iraqi army and police working together, of truly different sects, as one team, you know, to work for all the Iraqi people. And I said, and we're there with you. And he goes, yes, and I want you there with us; you're very important but I don't want you to stay forever. And I looked at him and I said, so at some point you do want us to leave. He goes, yes, but I don't want you to leave yet, but I do one day want you to leave.

So I think what you've got to be careful is when you hear some of this, quote, "polling data" that was done out there, if you ask most Iraqis, they'll tell you they would like for us to go home, and there's no question. But then if you say, do you want us to go home now, they would be the first to tell you, absolutely not, not now, not until there is greater security in our country.

So I just would be very cautious. I mean, I can cite data, too, and tell you that overwhelming majority, over 94 percent, state that they want to have a unified Iraq. They want one country. They don't want it divided up. They want it set into, you know, three separate divisions. They want a unified Iraq that everybody lives together peacefully.

So when you see that kind of data, too, where they want that, then you realize there is the possibility we can pull this back together, that there's enough people out there that really want this to happen. I mean, not just the majority, but an overwhelming majority want it to happen.

Q Okay, thanks.

STAFF: And Mark.

Q Thank you.

General Caldwell, it's Mark Finkelstein from News Busters. Thank you very much for the opportunity. It's great to speak with you again.

GEN. CALDWELL: Okay, Mark.

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Q Following up on Charlie's point and Jack Murtha's quote about the 64 percent, you know, at NewsBusters we cover the coverage. We cover how the media is covering things. And I'm wondering if you're seeing perhaps a slight change in that media coverage.

I wrote something the other day about Brian Williams' reports from Baghdad, and I am sure you're aware of them, and specifically with regard to the sentiments of the Iraqi people. I'm quoting from a Brian Williams report yesterday. He said, quote, "The Iraqi people are very reluctant to see the Americans go, because in many cases that's what's keeping the peace in town." And then later on while reporting on a difficult day of violence out in the provinces, he also added, "Note what we're not reporting this morning. We are not reporting another car bomb or suicide bomb or IED has gone off in central Baghdad or in Sadr City." And he says, "The conflict is changing. We have a conflict where the tempo may be changing and we have pockets of new peace."

So my question to you, General, is, are you seeing some change in the way that our media are reporting this, particularly when they get there on the ground?

GEN. CALDWELL: Just recently. It appears it's more neutral reporting than in the past. But to answer your question, yeah, because I think they're seeing it too. I was just earlier this afternoon with Al-Jazeera English, talking to their reporter, and she gets downtown a lot. And she was the one who told me. She said, "You know, General, there's a real change in the city right now." And I said, "Well, I can't tell you I definitely know that." But she goes, "No, there is." She says, "I'm down there all the time." And she says, "There is a change in the city. The people are feeling like that something is different, but not able to articulate what's different, but they're feeling there is something different."

So when the people start feeling that way, I think it will, in fact, be seen by the press; you know, it will speak for itself, so to speak, without us having to say a word when we get them down there embedded with units.

Just the units that are operating with the 2nd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, which is in Sadr City, I can't help but think when those reports start coming out here a little more -- there's more people who were embedded in the last 24 hours with them, that we'll see the same thing. I think they're being very surprised that the people are being open and willing to at least allow them to come in. They're not being confrontational and are observing and seeing what's happened. You know, whereas everybody had predicted that the Sadr City movement -- although it's being done simultaneously across all (10 ?) districts, but the one district that are working in Sadr City would be very challenging, has actually proven to be very much a cooperative effort between us, the Iraqi security forces and the citizens, the residents of Sadr City right now, which is very positive.

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I mean, not a shot's been fired, and everything seems to be moving along in a positive vein.

Q Of course, not all the media have changed. I noticed a New York Times article this morning on the Hilla event bombing, and they have a quote from somebody; a local Iraqi says, quote, "We hold the police responsible. We were searching the pilgrims to look for terrorists, and a police force came and prevented us from searching, saying that it's their job to do so." A few minutes after the police left, the explosion happened.

I wonder -- I don't know if there's really any way to comment on that sort of chaos -- chaotic situation, but I wonder if you could respond to that.

GEN. CALDWELL: Well, you know, for anybody who's been out in large crowds of people, I mean, we've got tens of thousands of people as part of the Arba'in pilgrimage, you know, moving along the roads, and you have two people that put suicide vests on and go inside of a tent where a lot of people have congregated and blow themselves up. I mean, that's -- in best case for anybody, that's a challenging thing to find, discover and see when you have that -- I mean, that volume of people moving, and I mean, it's a sad thing that happened.

But over all, when you look the -- what's been going on with the pilgrimage, the Iraqis truly are doing it. You know, they've asked us not to be involved, to step away and let them handle it, to provide the security for their people, and you know, then we provide support as they ask for it. But they're -- I mean, they truly are doing it, and they've actually been doing a fairly good job at this thing.

Q Okay. Thank you, General.

STAFF: And Victoria, were you able to join us?

Q I am. Good morning, General Caldwell. This is Victoria Coates from Redstate.

GEN. CALDWELL: Good morning.

Q I saw on defenselink a couple of days ago that the Iraqi security forces have taken over tactical command of Baghdad. I was wondering if you could comment on that, the significance of that event in the context of how the ISF is progressing.

And I was wondering, are we now taking tactical orders from the Iraqis in terms of how Baghdad's being managed?

GEN. CALDWELL: You are correct. On March 1st, General Abboud did take the command and control of all forces inside of Baghdad city, and he does it through his Baghdad Operations Center, what we call the BOC, was where he's running the command and control from here for this operation. And the American forces are, in fact, working in support of his ground tactical plan.

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And we've taken and basically put a U.S. battalion in every one of the 10 districts that then will remain there and continue to work with the Iraqi army and police forces in that district.

We, clearly, still have the Multinational Division Baghdad commander, Major General Joe Fil in command and control of his forces, and they work in cooperation with the Iraqi security forces. But he conducts operations as directed by General Abboud. So he works very closely with him, daily interaction, so that we're orchestrating all of our

activities together in the same direction. But it is a huge step forward. They've never been in charge with this many forces for this significant of an operation. You've got the Iraqi ground forces command structure which is looking at how to rotate battalions in and out at some point, too. In another month or two, they're talking about perhaps changing out one or two of the battalions that arrived as early as December, early January, with another two battalions within Iraq itself, which will be the first time that's ever occurred.

So there are truly a lot of very positive steps being taken forward as they continue to develop their capabilities to command and control their organization.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

STAFF: Okay, General, we're just about out of time here. But have you got any closing comments?

GEN. CALDWELL: No, I don't. I will tell you, I was asked a question yesterday by a reporter, and I didn't have an answer for it, whether there was any kind of correlation between the number of caches that we've been finding -- you know, we continue to find more and more caches each month over the last couple of months, and whether there's a correlation between that and tips that we've been getting on the national tips hotline.

So what I did, I came back and I grabbed my assessments folks that pull all my data together for me, and they came back this morning and they told me, they said, sir, it's probably three factors. One is you have increased presence in the city, which we had not had as great of a presence as we do now. We've had the numbers assigned to the city, but not out in the city like it is now. I mean, by going out and have already occupied 20 of these joint security stations, and they're moving up towards 70 eventually here, and almost one a day -- not literally, but almost one a day is opening up, I mean we're putting them together that rapidly. But the increased presence is leading not only to reduced levels of violence, but part of it is because we're getting more -- increased tips.

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The locals are in fact talking to us more, because they do see us staying and remaining at that location and working closely. You know, we go out on combined patrols together. And then from that, we're getting more weapon caches pointed out to us.

The figure they said -- my assessments guys, they said the overall average percentage of caches found using tips is 8 percent. So they said -- so from a straight quantity perspective, the number of cache-related tips is increasing and the number of caches found is increasing as well. They said between the period of September '06 to February of '07, the correlation between total tips numbers and monthly cache finds is 0.86, you know, which -- 1.0 is a perfect correlation, but 0.86 correlation, which, you know, is obviously very, very high.

So that was an interesting analysis they put together for me. So I guess the point being -- is, you know, we are in fact seeing that our increased presence is in fact leading to more tips, which is leading to us helping find more of these caches out there. And we've been finding significant ones. I want to say -- I'd have to go back and double-check, but I think it was -- in the month of February, we think we've found 96 caches of varying sizes, some very, very small, but some very, very large.

So there is a real payoff coming that perhaps we had not appreciated would be as great as it is right now.

STAFF: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us today and providing us with this opportunity.

Q Thank you, General.

Q Thank you, General.

GEN. CALDWELL: Thank you. I appreciate you all for what you do.

Q Hey, General, thank you very much for the time.

GEN. CALDWELL: It -- and I will just tell you all, if you ever have a question, I -- Major Shawn Stroud is my personal PAO that works with me. And if -- you know, if there's something you really need to know and you're not able to get it somehow, I would just tell you all feel free to go directly to him and -- I mean, it's just as important for us to provide the information to you all. So we would welcome the opportunity to help clarify or get something for you, if you needed it.

Q Appreciate it.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

Q (Off mike) -- do that. Thank you very much.

Q Thank you very much.

GEN. CALDWELL: Okay. Thank you all very much.

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